

By Invitation

# Why it's not enough for leaders to just be clever

Being quick in thoughts and retorts can actually be a drawback. In the end, wisdom matters more.



David Chan

For The Straits Times

Being clever contributes to adaptive leadership when it is accompanied by wisdom. Put in another way, the adaptive leader is both clever and wise. Here, wisdom is less about academic intelligence, cognitive abilities or analytical skills although these can help significantly. Instead, wisdom refers to the ability to see the “big picture” and translate one’s experience and knowledge into good judgment and decisions.

In the world of business and politics, adaptive leaders must not only be intelligent but also clever. For leaders to influence others, they must first attract attention. They must also demonstrate that they are different from the rest of the peers. And clever people make salient and lasting impressions. They stand out in a group.

Being clever is much more than the ability to process new information and learn easily. When calling people clever – be it in a discussion, debate or doing a deal – we mean they are able to think on their feet, provide an answer immediately and respond to an issue quickly.

Processing information speedily, responding under time pressures and making decisions under uncertainty are typical dimensions that can be found in many structured assessments of leadership used by talent-development experts.

So, is being clever an inherent part of being a good leader? It turns out that being clever is not always positively correlated with adaptive leadership.

### CLEVER BUT NOT WISE

We describe people as clever when they can immediately identify an issue, readily react to a comment, confidently counter a criticism and skilfully surprise the opponent. Clever people impress others with their quick wit. Their unexpected response catches their opponents or critics off guard.

Clever people clearly make a high impact when interacting with others. By being fast, novel and salient, a clever response – and the clever person – garners attention.

When applied adequately, cleverness is adaptive and contributes to solutions.

But cleverness can also be negative. In fact, we sometimes describe a person as clever in a derogative sense. Such as using one’s intelligence and wit deceitfully to mask the facts, manipulate the situation for self-interest or exploit others in a cunning way. Here, by clever, we really mean crafty.

But being clever can be maladaptive even when the clever person does not have any malicious intent.

For example, there is nothing malicious about the goal to prove one’s ability and performance. But research has shown that when a person’s goal is dominated by the

need to publicly prove his ability and performance, he can be so focused in achieving the desired personal outcome that he becomes blind-sided.

When obsessed with a performance goal focus, the person is out to win a debate or argument at all costs to demonstrate his superiority. He is unlikely to care about the feelings of others. Or the adverse impact that his clever responses could have on them. This means the opponent – if not as clever – may end up feeling publicly embarrassed in the debate and reacting in emotive ways that lead to a lose-lose situation for all.

The negative impact is not only on the opponent. Observers of the unpleasant interaction may not see the clever person as the real winner. They are likely to form the impression that the clever person is arrogant or characterise him with other negative personal attributes.

More importantly, it can easily erode trust in benevolence of the clever person as a leader. This happens when negative motivations and intentions are ascribed, rightly or wrongly, to the

clever person. Across multiple occasions and over time, maladaptive cleverness breeds cynicism in the person’s leadership.

So, it is possible that a clever person wins the battle and loses the war. When dealing with complex problems, rapidly changing situations and people-centric issues, the truly adaptive leader needs to be clever but, more importantly, he needs to be wise.

### ADAPTIVE LEADERS

Being clever contributes to adaptive leadership when it is accompanied by wisdom. Put in another way, the adaptive leader is both clever and wise.

Here, wisdom is less about academic intelligence, cognitive abilities or analytical skills, although these can help significantly. Instead, wisdom refers to the ability to see the “big picture” and translate one’s experience and knowledge into good judgment and decisions.

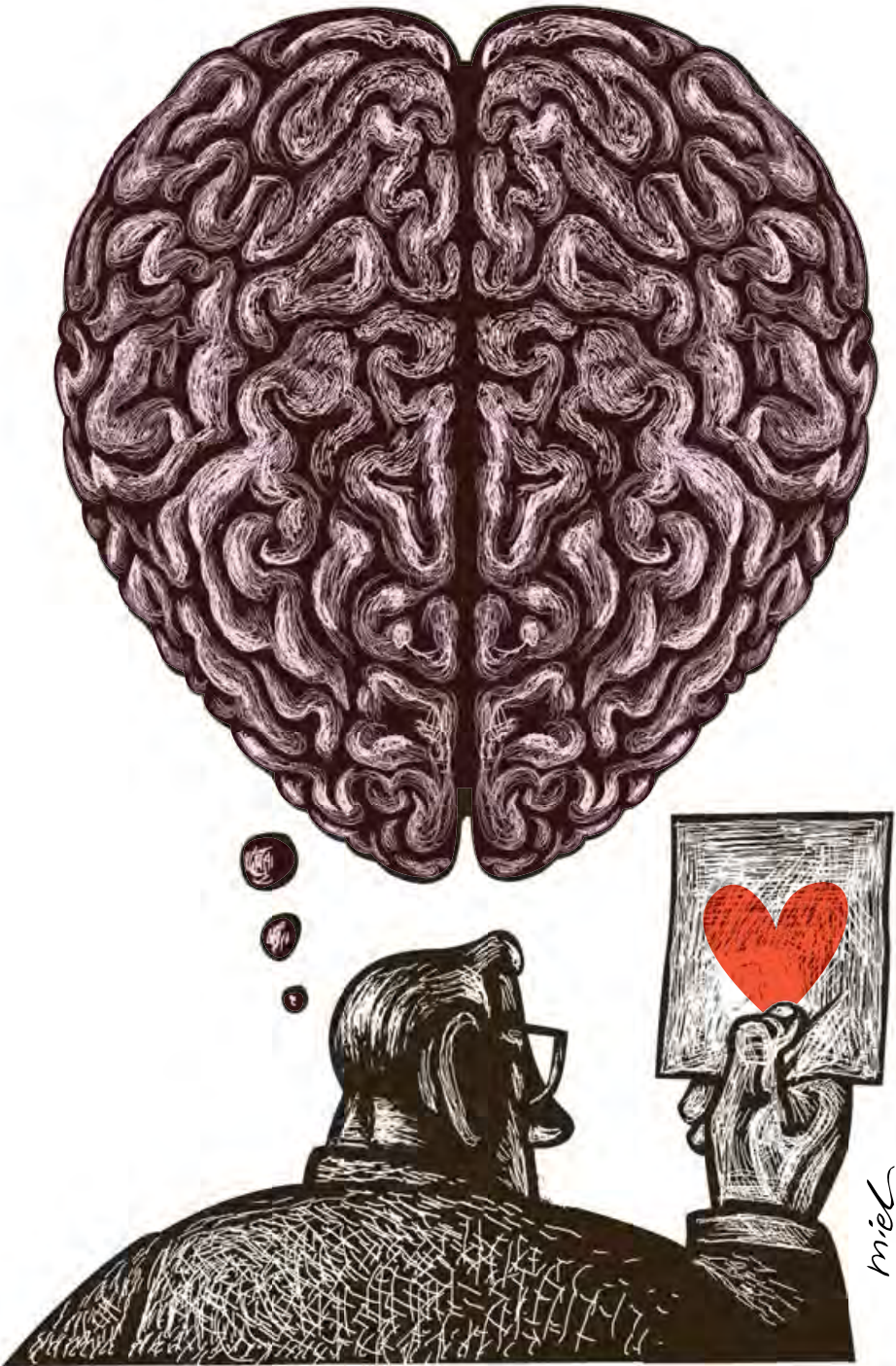
This is easier said than done. It involves the ability to discern the relevant experiences among one’s many experiences in different

domains of life. It also involves contextual knowledge, which means understanding what matters most or more in a practical context, especially to the different people involved in the situation.

For example, in a debate, the leader may give a clever response that dismisses alternative perspectives or suspends judgment on them to redirect the attention to the core issue. This is helpful when there is already a consensus that a decision needs to be made quickly. That is why a leader’s clever responses during crisis management are usually highly valued and seldom described as arrogant or disrespectful.

On the other hand, if there are major public concerns over power differences or fairness of the rules governing a debate, then the same clever response is likely to be perceived as arrogant or even bullying behaviour from the leader.

In business and politics, things are constantly in a state of flux. Time pressures are ubiquitous. So, both speed of response and person impact tend to feature prominently. Perhaps then it is not



surprising that many business and political leaders focus on being clever. It is important to be clever. But it is also important not to over-rate it.

More importantly, adaptive leaders are both clever and wise. This is practically possible. For a start, I suggest five learning points:

- Be truthful. Clever sound bites, analogies and metaphors are impressive. But precisely because they are captivating, their use should not mask the facts or detract from the key issues that really matter. The clever use of these communication tools is wise when the tools are effective means to clarify the larger picture and help explain the reality truthfully.
- Be humble. The leader who tries hard to show that he is the smartest person in the room will be perceived as arrogant. It is wise to be honestly humble. Acknowledge that one does not have all the answers and genuinely consult those who may know better. But there is no need to try hard to belittle oneself. A clever person who self-deprecates profusely will be seen as exhibiting false modesty, which erodes trust.
- Be informed. The clever and wise leader is well-informed. This means being knowledgeable about the practical context and having reliable information about the situation and the people involved. This requires effort to gather data from multiple sources to establish facts but also people’s beliefs that may not correspond to the objective situation. Why people believe things that are false is an important question to answer.
- Be novel. A clever response may be novel because the idea is original. But wisdom may involve novelty in the sense of new ways to combine ideas that already exist. This is especially relevant when translating experiences and knowledge into good judgment and decisions. This translation often requires seeing how existing ideas from different domains of experiences or knowledge are or can be related in ways that have not been done so previously.
- Be kind. It is not uncommon that a clever response ends up making the opponent look bad. Sometimes the embarrassment is a necessary consequence of exposing wrongdoing. But the clever response becomes unwise when its primary aim, either actual or perceived, is to disparage the opponent instead of addressing the substantive issues that matter most. It is wise to be gracious and generous in spirit when doing so does not compromise the truth. When wisely offered, kindness is a strength and not a weakness.

Clever leaders who are truthful, humble, informed, novel and kind tend to be also wise leaders. If leaders who have competence and character adopt these “think” attitudes when they interact with people, they will earn the people’s trust. How leaders think is as important as what they think.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute, Lee Kuan Yew Fellow and Professor of Psychology at the Singapore Management University.